James A. Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*
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EDINBURGH'S PHILOSOPHE

Books about the characteristic figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, unlike those about their French contemporaries, tend to concentrate on their ideas rather than their activities. A comparison of how they usually met their demise suggests why. Barnave wrote his *Introduction to the French Revolution* in 1792, while he was in prison awaiting trial and eventual execution for treason, after plotting counterrevolution with the royal family. Condorcet, also suspected of treason—although with rather less justification than Barnave—wrote his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* while in hiding during 1793, shortly before his death in captivity the following year. Contrast their fates with those of David Hume and his friend Adam Smith, both of whom, as far as we can tell, died peacefully in their beds. It is true that both men rejected the consolations of religion, and that their scepticism towards it was treated as no better than outright atheism by the Calvinist 'Popular' wing of the Church of Scotland; but the era was long gone in which a blasphemer could be executed in Edinburgh at the behest of the Kirk, as Thomas Aikenhead had been in 1697. The risks they ran were to career and reputation, rather than to life and limb.

The differences are partly to do with the divergent forms taken by the French and Scottish revolutions: the former the prototype for all subsequent revolutions from below; the latter the first 'passive revolution' from above—to which both Hume and (especially) Smith contributed as theorists. Perhaps because their distance from the immediate process of social change led to

comparatively—and mercifully—uneventful lives, biographies of the Scots have been relatively few and far between. In the case of Smith, his disciple Dugald Stewart established the basic framework in 1794 with the long essay 'Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LLD', which began the process of de-radicalizing his work. Between that point and the 1980s, when an era of modern scholarship addressing Smith's life rather than his work commenced, there appeared precisely two biographies, published in 1895 and 1937. Hume has been even more poorly served. His five-page memoir, 'My Own Life', written in the knowledge of his impending death from cancer in 1776, provided the framework for Thomas Edward Ritchie's *An Account of the Life and Writings of David Hume* (1807)—a volume otherwise consisting of extracts from his letters and unpublished essays. Only two treatments of his life followed, in 1836 and 1931, before the appearance of the standard biography, E. C. Mossner's *The Life of David Hume*, in 1954. This remains the most valuable source of information on Hume's life, but it deals with his ideas only in so far as they provide what Mossner called 'the rationale of his actions'—an approach that was still being followed fifty years later in Roderick Graham's *The Great Infidel* (2004), with diminishing returns. In short, discussions of Hume's work tend to treat his biography as 'background', and biographies tend to focus on his work only to the extent that it relates to his personal circumstances.

His life is not without interest, of course, however uneventful it may appear by the standards of late-eighteenth-century France. Hume's trajectory was emblematic of the intellectual during the period when Scotland was undergoing the transition to capitalism and Britain was establishing its paramountcy over France as the dominant European power—as his dates suggest. Born in Edinburgh in 1711, only four years after the Anglo-Scottish Treaty of Union had given birth to Great Britain, he died in the same city in 1776, as the outbreak of the American Revolution prepared the first setback for what was now a British Empire. As the younger son of a relatively minor landowner and advocate—John Home of Ninewells in Berwickshire, who died when his children were very young—Hume would have been expected to acquire a profession, most obviously in law, but he never did. (The change of vowel in his surname was another departure.) Although he attended the College of Edinburgh at what now seems to us the extraordinarily young age of ten (the normal age was fourteen at the time), he never graduated and would maintain himself through a diverse series of posts. He worked as a clerk in Bristol in the early 1730s and acted as tutor and companion to the mentally unstable Marquis of Annandale in 1745–46, before taking up several posts in Britain's military and diplomatic bureaucracy, first as secretary to the British General James St Clair during his campaigns against the

French, then as secretary to the British embassies in Turin and Vienna. His last official post was as under-secretary of state for the Northern Department (that is, Europe north of France) between 1767 and 1768. Despite being one of the leading intellectuals of his time, Hume applied—or was proposed by his friends—for only two academic posts, one as professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh (1745), which he was denied following a petitioning campaign by the local Kirk ministers, the other as professor of Logic and Metaphysics at Glasgow (1751), for which he was never seriously considered because of the heterodoxy of his religious views. The only one of his positions in any way connected to academic life was that of Keeper of the Edinburgh Faculty of Advocates' Library between 1752 and 1757.

During this time, Hume produced over sixty essays and pamphlets and, aside from the collections in which these appeared, four substantial books, two of them multi-volume in scope. In James Harris's new intellectual biography, we finally have a work which integrates discussion of this *oeuvre* within the context of what is known about his life, without privileging either at the other's expense, in a way similar to, but more developed than, Nicholas Phillipson's approach to Hume's friend in *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (2010). This fine balance is not the limit of Harris's achievement, but it is the starting point for it. As he notes in the preface, very few new facts have emerged since the revised edition of Mossner's book appeared in 1980. However, unlike Mossner, whose groundless speculations are notorious among Hume scholars, Harris usually alerts the reader when there is a lack of conclusive evidence—about, for example, which books Hume was reading or in which debates he was intervening—and is clear when he is making defensible inferences rather than presenting facts.

But in any work of this sort, however scrupulous the historical account or accurate the theoretical exposition, the real interest is likely to be whether an author gives a plausible new interpretation of at least some aspect of their subject. As we shall see, Harris does so, but also shows that Hume was a deeply unreliable narrator on his own account, continually downplaying the extent to which he was personally admired by many of the leading European minds of his day, and how, from the start, his work was taken with great seriousness, even by those who disagreed with it. There may have been psychological reasons for this, including, as Harris suggests, the fact that 'he was rather more sensitive as regards hostile criticism than he was as regards praise', but more generally, 'there seems to have been something in Hume that prevented him from acknowledging, perhaps even to himself, the success he undoubtedly had.' Hume did concede in a very late letter to one of his friends that he had, as the Scots say, 'a good conceit of himself', to which Harris adds: 'And there might have been vanity also in, precisely, this refusal

to acknowledge that what he had achieved had not, in fact, gone completely unrecognized.' 'Not completely unrecognized' is an understatement, and Harris's caution against treating 'My Own Life' as an accurate assessment of Hume's impact during his own lifetime is well taken. Beyond this properly critical attitude to his subject's own utterances, Harris offers two major shifts in perspective regarding Hume's work.

First, he challenges the dominant conception of Hume, in which he is primarily a philosopher who produced one great work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), at the early age of 26. The *Treatise* is a much discussed and controversial classic of Western philosophy, scarcely susceptible to summary in a few sentences, but for our purposes the following aspects are most relevant. Hume argued that we cannot truly understand causal relationships through reason, but only assume them on the basis of 'certain principles' that are inherent in our minds. Unlike Locke, he rejected the notion of mind as a passive *tabula rasa* that receives the impress of experience, claiming instead that it is the site of innate ideas and propensities—particularly in relation to explaining events. Broadly, because we observe a chain of events ending in a particular way, we assume that they always will, but this is at best only a probability. As Harris summarizes Hume: 'On the demonstrative, mathematical conception of rationality that philosophers had been most interested in since the start of the scientific revolution, it was, Hume saw, actually *irrational* to believe anything at all on the basis of experience alone.' The level of existential uncertainty to which this degree of scepticism tends might appear profoundly destabilizing, but Hume argued that it need not be, since societies can and should survive by relying on habit or custom as a guide to everyday life. We respond to external stimuli in certain ways because of our human nature, which is expressed through the passions, or 'original existences', which are quite separate from each other and not amenable to rational analysis. They are best understood as being 'needs' or 'desires'. The contrast between reason and the passions is of course a venerable one, extending back to the ancient world, but it acquired a heightened significance during the Enlightenment, when the task of establishing the powers and limits of human reason took on a new urgency in the face of several varieties of confessional obscurantism. Pascal invoked it during the 1650s in the *Pensées* ('the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing'), as did Spinoza shortly afterwards in the *Tractatus Politicus*, but Hume was perhaps the first thinker to devote so much attention to the distinction. What is most striking about his position—expounded in one of the first great works of the Scottish Enlightenment—is the *limits* he set on human rationality. As he wrote in the *Treatise*: 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.'

There are two versions of what happened once Hume had published this groundbreaking work. In the first, he is seen as continuing to pursue his philosophical interests but mostly, as it were, by other means: in this account, everything he writes on whatever subject is infused with the positions he established in the *Treatise*. In the second, associated above all with Lytton Strachey, Hume was so dispirited by the hostile reception of his first book, and the subsequent reluctance of anyone to republish it, that he abandoned his true philosophical vocation for writing about a series of unrelated subjects, driven by his desire for literary fame rather than any deeper intellectual purpose. Harris rejects both versions.

Hume's work does not in fact form a unified whole, Harris argues, and in this respect is quite unlike that of Smith. This may seem counter-intuitive, given the existence of the 'Adam Smith Problem', the supposed inconsistency between the anthropological accounts of human nature offered in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*, first identified by Roederer in 1793 and popularized by Smith's German interlocutors during the 1840s. In the former work, Smith claimed that humans act from sympathy with, or altruism towards, their own kind, whereas in the latter he appeared to argue that they act from selfish motives, or at least the pursuit of individual self-interest, although this will have beneficial effects. There is indeed a contradiction here, but it is not between altruism on the one hand and individualism on the other. It is rather that in the earlier work, Smith was presenting an account of how human beings behave as social individuals abstracted from any particular context; in its successor, of how they behave in what he called 'commercial society', in which they are compelled to behave as egoistic beings. The contradiction, in other words, lay in social reality, not in the writings of Smith. But Hume's work is *actually* unsystematic in a way Smith's is not.

The reason for this also supplies Harris's rationale for arguing that we should not treat Hume primarily as a disappointed philosopher with an overarching vision; rather, we should understand him as a man of letters, who, as Harris puts it, 'wanted to write about what he wanted to write about, in the way he wanted to write about it, without interference from a patron, a political master, or a bookseller'. To be sure, Hume was 'a *philosophical* man of letters', but one 'who wrote on human nature, on politics, on religion, and on the history of England from 55 BC to 1688', and only by understanding what this meant 'in the middle of the eighteenth century' can we truly understand Hume. There were few models: Pope, Shaftesbury, perhaps Voltaire. 'To call yourself a man of letters was to distance yourself both from the academic specialisms of the university and from the narrow and pedantic obsessions of the gentleman *érudit*.' This involved a high level of general learning and, while avoiding the need for patronage or the restrictions

of an academic position, also meant freeing oneself from the burden of journalistic hack work. It required, in other words, what Hume called 'independence', which is why he seemed genuinely unperturbed when he was refused professorships at Edinburgh and Glasgow. Literary style was important for a man of letters because 'he did not write as a specialist only for fellow specialists', but for 'a very large readership among the educated men and women of his day, in Britain, and in Europe more generally'—preferably among those prepared to enter 'a certain kind of discursive space' in which ideas could be discussed impersonally and without resort to the familiar *ad hominem* second-guessing of personal motivations. Pursuing this theme in relation to the *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Harris claims that Hume was 'seeking to establish a kind of alliance between himself and his readers, an alliance of the cosmopolitan and the lettered, against the academic philosophy of the modern world'. The academic and the man—or very occasionally, woman—of letters came into being at more or less the same point, with Smith representing the first, Hume the second (although Smith left his chair in Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University as soon as he could in 1764 to concentrate on writing *The Wealth of Nations*). There is no doubt which of the two has become the focus of intellectual life today: for us, Hume is not merely a distant historical figure, but a vanished social type.

The second of Harris's shifts in perspective lies in relation to Hume's major works. Harris is an academic historian of philosophy, and his previous scholarship has mainly been focused accordingly. It is all the more creditable, then, that while not neglecting the *Treatise*, Harris insists on taking *The History of England* (1754–62) seriously, devoting two entire chapters and more than one-fifth of the text to that work. This is entirely justifiable in view of its scale. Originally intended as the bulk of a *History of Great Britain* from the Union of the Crowns in 1603 to the Hanoverian Succession of 1714, the first two volumes climaxed with the passing of the Bill of Rights following the Glorious Revolution of 1688. However, rather than complete the book with a discussion of the ensuing quarter-century, Hume instead decided to plunge back into a much longer *English* past, producing a further four volumes. Harris recounts the process:

> The decay of feudalism, and the concomitant increase in the power of the Commons, stood to be explored in detail, as did the related matter of the effects, intellectual, spiritual, and material, of the English Reformation. Nor would that in the end prove to be sufficient. It would come to seem to Hume that the Tudor period itself required explanation, and that the story needed after all to be taken all the way back to where English history was usually thought to begin, to the Roman invasion of 55 BC.

Until the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the *History* was the book for which Hume was most celebrated; from then on, it would be criticized or even dismissed both for its lack of attention to available primary sources and for the tone of intellectual detachment in which it was written—although one suspects that the overwhelming dominance of Macaulay's *History of England*, the Whig conception of history incarnate, was also a major factor in its eclipse. For as Harris notes, Hume's work embodied 'a philosophy of politics that was as sceptical about the myths of Whiggism as it was about the myths of Toryism'. By rejecting interpretations of the Glorious Revolution that portrayed it as either the restoration of ancient English liberties or as an illegitimate foreign usurpation, Hume began to establish a modern conception of revolution in general. Harris writes that, for Hume, 1688 'was genuinely a *revolution*, a replacement of one political order with something quite different'. Moreover, it was one that could only be explained by 'the international political situation, and William of Orange's appreciation of the role that a newly wealthy English crown might play in resistance against French universal monarchy and the preservation of a balance of power in Europe'. Hume's early advocacy of 'the international' as an explanatory factor was impressive. But his reliance on it was almost total, to the exclusion of all else: 'There was sufficient explanation to be found in the European situation', Harris writes, 'and in William's conception of the role he might play in that situation'.

This pursuit of monocausal external explanation points to a more general problem to be found in Hume's work, with which Harris does not really engage. In his essay, 'Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic', Hume was dismissive of the seventeenth-century republican James Harrington, who allegedly 'thought himself so sure of his general principles, *that the balance of power depends on that of property*, that he ventured to pronounce it impossible ever to re-establish monarchy in England: but his book was scarcely published when the king was restored; and that monarchy has ever since subsisted on the same footing as before.' Harrington, whose insight into the impossibility of maintaining an imbalance between economic and political power marks him as the first great theorist of social revolution, would not really have been confounded by this development. The restored monarchy could not rule in the accustomed manner because, as Harrington saw, the property relations on which it relied had fundamentally altered. It was precisely the attempt to rule as if this had not been the case that led to the fall of the House of Stuart in 1688. The international rivalry between England and France was not simply a struggle for geopolitical dominance between undifferentiated kingdoms, but also a clash between different social systems.

It is not that Hume was completely oblivious to the ways in which changes in socio-economic conditions affect political life—as witness, for example, his argument in 'Of Refinement in the Arts', that the replacement of a class of subaltern feudal tenants by that of independent capitalist farmers was conducive to liberty. The point is rather that he tended to address issues in isolation from each other, which perhaps indicates the potential downside of being primarily a man of letters. Harris certainly points to examples, such as the promisingly titled 'On the Study of History', where Hume was simply trivial. The problem is deeper than this, however, and seems to be related to one of his fundamental philosophical positions.

As far as historical explanation is concerned, that problem is Hume's methodological individualism, which focuses on supposedly permanent aspects of the human condition rather than the more indeterminate effects of socio-economic change. At one point, Harris speculates on why Hume never wrote the projected Volume V of the *Treatise*, which was to have been on politics. Ferguson, Kames, Millar and Smith all wrote on this subject, and Harris believes that Hume could have done so too: 'There seems little doubt that, had he wanted to, Hume himself could have used his own theory of human nature to something like the same end'. I do doubt this, if only because Hume's theory of human nature was essentially designed to explain *repetition* rather than development in human affairs. Harris reports Hume's attitude to the 'Wilkes and Liberty' mobilizations: 'A weakening of political authority produced anarchy, and out of anarchy had arisen despotism. There was, Hume thought, every reason to think that the same thing would happen again'. Abstractions like 'authority' and 'anarchy' here serve as substitutes for historically specific analysis, and the same assumption of eternal behavioural patterns informed his discussions of historical movements, such as the radical sects. According to Harris, Hume

> argued that a first efflorescence of enthusiasm was bound to be extremely destabilizing, as was shown by the anarchical tendencies of the Anabaptists in Germany, the Camisars in France, the Levellers in England, and the Covenanters in Scotland. But enthusiasm faded with time, and the absence of a power structure within Protestant sects meant that there was no one interested in maintaining orthodoxy of belief and practice within each sect, so that in the end there was a general sinking into mutual toleration and 'the greatest remissness and coolness in sacred matters'.

Aside from the implausible notion that the highly doctrinaire Scottish Covenanters did not possess a 'power structure', the difficulty with this argument can be seen in the utter heterogeneity of the list of movements it assembles. Anabaptism was a mass millenarian movement; the later (i.e.

post-Restoration) Covenanters and Camisars were geographically focused groupings that deployed religious beliefs in pursuit of local grievances; the Levellers were not a religious grouping at all, but in some respects the first modern political organization. Their endings too were quite different: the Anabaptists were annihilated or dispersed; the Levellers were defeated, although their ideas later revived in different organizational forms; the Covenanters and Camisars ultimately came to terms either with new regimes (in the first case) or the existing power (in the second).

It is always wrong to criticize biographers for the views of their subjects, but in these instances Harris either agrees with Hume or at least refuses to consider possible difficulties in his position. This is all the more surprising since, elsewhere in his book, Harris notes that explanations for actual patterns of political and religious belief are lacking in the *History*: 'This had a particularly deleterious effect on Hume's treatment of Scotland', which 'figures in the narrative almost exclusively as a land of fundamentalist Presbyterian fervour'. Hume's reaction to the concluding episode of the Scottish—and British—revolution, which occurred while he was abroad working for General St Clair, offers another example of this: in Harris's own words, 'the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 was a reminder that the constitutional revolution that had begun in 1688 had not yet succeeded in moving Britain decisively beyond the political and religious problems of the seventeenth century.' The Hanoverian regime was still vulnerable, 'especially in Scotland'. But why? The international dimension, so important in Hume's account of 1688, here vanishes completely, even though the '45 has to be seen as a key moment in the inter-systemic conflict between England/Britain and France from 1688 to 1763, and could not have occurred without French support. There was of course an indigenous basis for the rising in the declining class of lesser lairds, but here the encroachment of capitalist social relations of production on the feudal classes was rather more important than the religious problems of the eighteenth century. Harris notes elsewhere that 'a striking feature of the political essays that Hume published in 1741 and 1742' was that 'in them nothing at all was said of international affairs'; but here the author is insufficiently critical of the deep ahistorical tendencies in his subject's thought.

Mention of Scotland leads to a final issue: Hume's relationship to his own nation. In this matter, Harris relies more than usually on considerations of the 'must have read' or 'might have been aware of' variety. Nevertheless, he argues convincingly that Hume's intellectual influences came at least as much from the Scottish scene—above all, the work of Francis Hutcheson and Henry Kames—as they did from France, in the writings of Malebranche. (He also notes in passing the importance of a figure who

has been unjustly maligned, not least by Marx in *Capital*: Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun). Whether Hume's writings were intended to influence socio-economic developments in his native country is less clear. Harris rehearses the references to Scotland in the *Essays, Moral and Political*, but concludes that 'it could not be said that the book had anything like a Scottish agenda'. He ascribes this to Hume's desire for a British audience, which was demonstrably real; but this does not mean that the essays were not influenced by Scottish conditions. It can be argued, for example, that Hume's discussion of the relationship between different types of tenure and liberty in 'Of Refinement in the Arts' was intended as an example to his fellow Scots, then in the early stages of the transition to capitalist agriculture, even if there is no way of confirming this supposition.

Alasdair MacIntyre once said of *The History of England* that Hume wrote about Scotland as if it were a foreign country. Harris concurs:

> Hume was not, and did not want to be seen to be, writing as a Scot. He self-consciously distanced himself from myths the Scots had about themselves, notably the myth that, thanks to the efforts of the reformers, Scotland was a land of political freedom long before England. Scotland during the sixteenth century was, in fact, according to Hume, barely a state in the proper sense of the word at all.

In this assessment Hume was broadly correct and, in the context of current debates over Scottish independence, which inevitably involve reflections on its history, some of his scepticism over national myths is urgently required—not to support the crumbling Unionist status quo, but so that the case for independence is not based on fantasies about the Scottish past. In this respect, Harris's book is also politically significant in a way that he may not have intended. For he conveys with great clarity the struggle that was required in Edinburgh for the victory of the Enlightenment thinkers and their allies among the Kirk Moderates over the defenders of traditionalist Calvinist orthodoxy. The endless self-congratulatory chatter about the Scottish Enlightenment often treats it as a natural outgrowth from the previous course of Scottish history, rather than as a movement setting out to change that course: this is not a mistake Hume could have made.

But Harris's book is obviously of importance for reasons other than what it—perhaps inadvertently—contributes to our present political debates. He presents a model of how to undertake intellectual biography, where consideration of the subject's work emerges, as it were, organically from the narrative of his life, without abrupt changes of register; and he has produced what is likely to become recognized as the definitive work on Hume. I wrote above that the lives of Smith and Hume were very different

from those of their French counterparts, but in one sense Hume at least was comparable to them. He emerges from the pages of Harris's book as a genuinely bourgeois figure, of a sort who could not have existed in Scotland in an earlier period; a man not directly involved with the new processes of capitalist production, but whose personality and interests would have been unthinkable without them.